

BELONGING

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*To the memory of
CLAIRE H. SANSOM,
SOE code-breaker, and one of those
teachers one never forgets,
who encouraged me to believe I could write*

*And for ANN CHALK,
because I promised*

‘It is interesting that Hindus, when they speak of the creation of the universe, do not call it the work of God, they call it the play of God, the Vishnu lila, lila meaning play. And they look upon the whole manifestation of all the universes as a play, as a sport, as a kind of dance...’

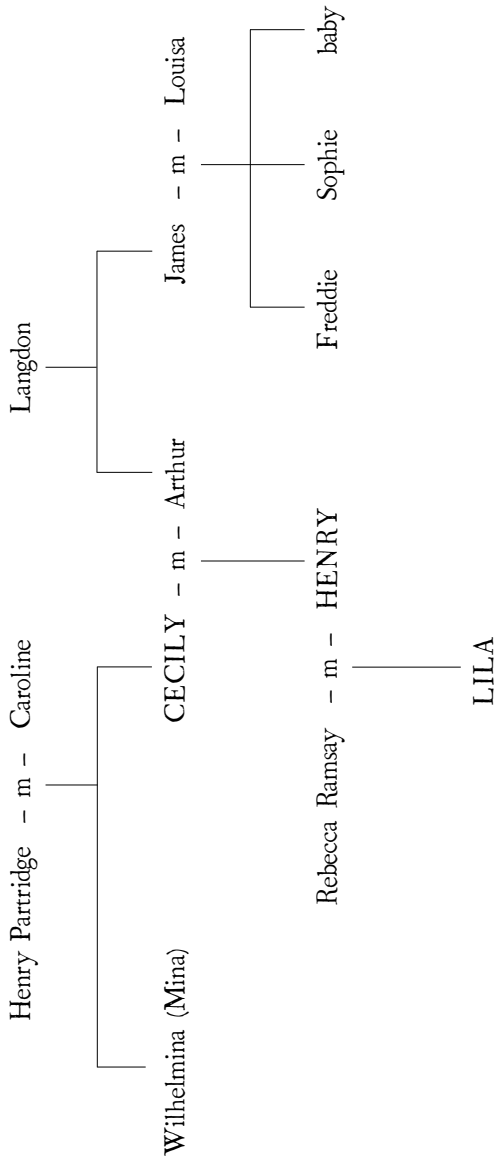
Alan Watt, *Zen and the Beat Way*

‘The past is never dead. It is not even past.’

William Faulkner

FAMILY TREE

Narrators' names in capital letters



Lila

Peshawar, India, 14th July 1907

The child climbed up the shelves of the almirah, placing her bare feet between the folded piles of embroidered linen. She knelt on the top, leant down and closed the heavy carved doors, then pulled herself on to the wide shelf that ran above door height along the back corridor of the bungalow. The shelf, used to store old luggage, was covered in dust, and she looked regretfully at the marks it left on her nightdress. Her ayah would be cross, but it was too late to think of that now.

There was room to stand upright on the shelf. Balancing like a tightrope walker, she picked her way through the bags and cases until she reached the fanlight above the dining room doors. The panes of glass were fly-spotted and covered in cobwebs. She knelt and brushed the cobwebs aside, wiping the stickiness off on to a nearby carpet bag, then licked a finger and rubbed a small clean circle into the glass. Now she could see.

In front of her the frill of the punkah hung motionless; the punkahwallah would still be on the front verandah, fanning the guests in the drawing room. She looked down at the table.

The silver, which tarnished quickly at this time of year, was freshly polished, and the cut glass sparkled in the candlelight. She peered at the tablecloth but its elaborate embroidery was obscured under the weight of crockery, glass and silver; all she could see was the border on her side, which seemed to consist of a repeating Tree of Life motif with brightly coloured flowers and fruit. Her mother had been working on it for months, shut away in her room. It was a surprise for her father's birthday – her mother had laid the table herself so that even the servants would not see.

Rain rattled on the corrugated roof and humidity wrapped around her like a blanket. She knew she should not be up there but she was eager to see her father's face when the tablecloth was revealed in all its glory. She had been planning it all day, and slipped away as soon as he had finished reading to her, while her ayah was helping her mother to dress.

She hoped they would not be long. It was uncomfortable kneeling on the shelf. Bits of grit were digging into her knees and she pinched her nose to stop herself sneezing. She shifted to ease her legs and one foot slipped off the shelf behind her.

'Oho! What are you doing up there, baby? Are you up to mischief again?'

She jumped as Afzal Khan's deep voice boomed out. He reached up and grasped her foot, pulling her back towards the edge.

'Sssshh,' she whispered, trying to wriggle free. 'Let go!'

He lowered his voice. 'Come down, Missie Baba. Memsahib will be angry if she sees you up there. And you will get very dirty.'

'Sssshh!' she said again. 'I want to see the tablecloth!'

'Where is Ayah?'

‘In Mother’s room. She thinks I’m in bed. Please don’t call her!’

He laughed. ‘Don’t make such big-big eyes at me! Who would believe you are twelve years old? My daughter is the same age as you and she is soon to be betrothed. Now be quiet. I’m going to open the door. Do I look smart?’

She turned and peered at him. He was wearing a white starched tunic with polished brass buttons and his saffron turban and cummerbund.

‘Your turban isn’t straight.’ She reached down and adjusted it for him. ‘Now you look very handsome.’

He laughed and tickled her foot and she jerked it away, stifling a giggle. ‘Stop it!’

He took a deep breath, stood up tall and pushed open the doors, emerging into the dining room below her. The stiffly pleated fan on his turban fluttered as he crossed the room to open the doors that led into the drawing room. He bowed. ‘Dinner is served, memsahib.’ Then he came back through the dining room and out the doors beneath her, closing them behind him.

She leant over and snatched at the fan of his turban. He grabbed at it, settling it back on his head, then turned and shook his finger. ‘You behave, or I’ll call Ayah.’

‘Will you save me some birthday cake?’

‘If you behave like a jungli, no – climbing up like a monkey to spy on people!’

‘Oh, please, Afzal Khan!’

‘Then stop eating my head. I have work to do.’ He walked to the door that led out to the compound and called to the bearer to be ready to bring in the dishes.

She turned back to the fanlight. The punkahwallah must have moved round from the drawing room, because the cloth

frill of the punkah was moving now, stirring the candle flames in the silver candelabra so that the leaping tigers and rearing elephants on their bases moved in the shifting light and the open mouths of the mahouts on the elephants' backs seemed to quiver in terror.

The drawing room doors opened and her father came through with a pregnant lady on his arm. He looked tired and preoccupied, as he had for some days now. As he approached the table he glanced up and for a moment she thought he had seen her, but he pulled out the lady's chair before seating himself in his usual place, directly opposite her vantage point. Her mother came in next, on the arm of an older man with a brush moustache and military bearing. She was wearing her green silk with the emerald brooch and earrings that matched her eyes. The other guests followed. Uncle Roland was there with a pretty lady friend with blonde curls, but Uncle Gavin was missing.

A procession of dishes flowed in from the kitchen, the rich smells of meat and saffron-flavoured sauces rising to where she was sitting and making her mouth water. The guests' own bearers served their masters and mistresses and lined up behind them, ready to step forward when needed. She waited, absorbed in watching them, lulled by the low murmur of voices and occasional laughter.

Most of the faces were turned towards her mother, who was sitting with her back to the fanlight, so all the child could see were her animated hand gestures and her ringlets swaying as she turned her head. Her father, sitting opposite, seemed abstracted, and barely spoke or touched his food.

She noticed the blonde lady pick up the edge of the tablecloth and examine it, then say something to Uncle Roland. He looked down at it and then sharply up at her

mother, then glanced towards her father, who didn't seem to notice.

At long last dinner was over and Afzal Khan emerged from the compound with the cake. He paused as he passed below her and she felt the heat of the candles on her face as she bent towards it. It was a giant confection of meringue topped with mango and orange cream, with the words 'Happy 50th Birthday, Henry' inscribed on it in chocolate in her mother's flowing hand. The guests exclaimed as Afzal Khan placed it in the centre of the table and poured champagne from the ice bucket on the sideboard, then cheered and laughed as her father took three breaths to blow out the candles. There were toasts and more conversation as the cake was eaten. Her legs had gone to sleep and she had almost joined them by the time the bearers moved to clear the table.

As the plates, place mats and large silver platters were lifted away, voices rose in admiration, then faltered. A hush fell as everyone stared at the cloth. The servants, puzzled by the silence, turned to look, the dishes poised in their hands. It was like the scene from *Sleeping Beauty* when everyone in the palace was turned to stone.

She knelt up and rubbed at the smeary window, trying to see the cloth more clearly, but all she could make out was a mass of swirling colours and shapes. Then everything was noise and motion: there were shouts of anger and disgust as people jumped to their feet; chairs fell to the floor but no one stopped to pick them up as they jostled to get out the doors to the drawing room. The lady in pink looked faint; the pregnant lady snatched up a napkin and was sick into it; the elderly man put his arm around her and glared at her mother.

Alarmed, she turned to get down but servants were spilling out of the doors below her so they could run round to see to

their masters and mistresses. From the front of the bungalow she heard Afzal Khan shouting for the syces to bring the carriages up.

She looked back into the room and saw the old soldier stop and squeeze her father's shoulder as he passed, but her father did not look up. His eyes were fixed on the table in front of him and his face was expressionless, as though he was listening to a voice only he could hear. Uncle Roland appeared in the doorway and hesitated. He stepped towards the table as though to speak, but stopped, his eyes fixed on the tablecloth in front of her father; then he turned and walked from the room, brushing past Afzal Khan, who was handing out hats, shawls and sticks to the departing guests. When the last one had gone, Afzal Khan pulled the double doors closed from the other side. She waited for him to come back so she could ask him what had happened but he must have forgotten her, because no one came.

The rain had stopped now, and everything was silent except for the steady creaking of the punkah; only the two of them remained in the dining room, her father staring at the cloth, her mother at the sideboard. It wasn't until her father moved that she realised she had been holding her breath. He pushed back his chair, got heavily to his feet and walked past his wife without looking at her.

As he passed below the shelf, she turned. There was a moment when she might have reached down, when she might have touched the top of his head where the scalp showed through the thinning hair. But he had already moved on, down the corridor towards his study.

Her first impulse was to jump down, to follow him, but curiosity held her still. She shifted and rubbed her legs, gasping at the agonising pins and needles, as she watched her

mother dreamily stroking the cloth, her head tilted, as though she too was listening to some faraway sound.

But when the sound came it was not far away at all but very near, and so loud that for a few moments afterwards the child's ears rang.

She threw herself backwards off the shelf, and as her feet hit the ground she heard Afzal Khan shout something from the compound and the scrape of a dining chair. She would never remember getting to the study, just the feel of the cool brass knob under her hand and the sight that met her eyes as she fell in the door.

Inside the study, a fountain of red – a pure, beautiful red – had spouted up the wall behind the desk and splattered over the ceiling. The smell of cordite and something sharper, metallic, caught in her throat. On the shelf behind the desk the bronze statue of Shiva was dancing in the lamplight, his shadowy limbs undulating against the wall in his circle of flames. She stared at it, trying not to look at the thing slumped over the desk. There was a strange vibration, a silent drumbeat; the air quivered in time to it and the shadows moved faster, the god's limbs a blur. She shivered and looked down at the fine red mist settling on her bare arms.

Blind and dizzy, she turned towards the door and collided with someone coming in. Sharp nails sank into her shoulders. She bit back a cry of pain and looked up. Her mother was standing in front of her, looking not at her but at the wall behind her. In the soft lamplight her face was as composed as the picture of the Madonna that hung above her bed. Her eyes followed the fountain up and back down to the desk, as the child waited for her expression to change. She heard her mother's breath release and felt a shudder run through her as

her fingers released their grip. She took a step back and then, as the girl watched, her eyes widened and her lips curled into a smile.